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ABSTRACT

People's conception of uniqueness in policy debate has changed dramatically in the past decade. Concepts like "we control uniqueness" and "direction of uniqueness" have come to dominate disadvantage debates. Unfortunately, policy debate has suffered as an activity as the result of some of these debating practices. In response, debaters and judges should reevaluate the ways in which they consider the question of uniqueness, evidence standards for uniqueness evidence should be raised, and uniqueness debates should include discussions of probability. (Author/RS)

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The Continuing Importance of Uniqueness

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Abstract

Our conception of uniqueness in policy debate has changed dramatically in the past decade. Concepts like "we control uniqueness" and "direction of uniqueness" have come to dominate disadvantage debates. Unfortunately, policy debate has suffered as an activity as the result of some of these debating practices. In response, debaters and judges should reevaluate they ways in which they consider the question of uniqueness, evidence standards for uniqueness evidence should be raised, and uniqueness debates should include discussions of probability.

The Continuing Importance of Uniqueness

Growing up in a debate family, I received an early exposure to paradigms used by judges of debates. My father, a hypothesis tester, made half-serious attempts to "raise up" his child in the way he should go. I was taught that the resolution was the focus of the debate, the affirmative had to justify the resolution, and conditional arguments were just ways to "poke" the resolution. One thing the hypo-testers share with the rest of the community is a fascination with causal relationships. We like to think that we understand events around us more than the general population. One way we explore these relationships is through uniqueness debates. We argue that a disadvantage is not unique, another way of saying that it is not the cause of the problem. Uniqueness makes discussion of causal relationships complex and specific. Even if uniqueness debates, and debates in general, have changed dramatically, uniqueness continues to be a vital part of policy debate. Uniqueness is critical to understanding link debates, it encourages comprehensive research, and uniqueness arguments are the best defense against impact-centered debates.

Why this discussion?

Our conception of uniqueness in policy debate has changed dramatically in the past decade. Concepts like "we control uniqueness" and "direction of uniqueness" have come to dominate disadvantage debates. As counterplan theory becomes more liberal, debaters have had to come to grips with the idea that one need only win a slight possibility of a risk of a disadvantage in order to win a net benefit for ones counterplan.

For example, I heard several debates at the 2001 National Debate Tournament in which the negative team relied heavily on the combination of their counterplan and their uniqueness arguments to function as "link boosters" for their main disadvantages. Additionally, many judges have begun to decide uniqueness debates in a "check the box" manner not unlike judging from a stock issues paradigm. Using a stock issues paradigm, a judge decides whether the affirmative won or lost each of five stock issues: inherency, harms, significance, topicality, and solvency. If the balance of one of these issues tipped towards the negative even slightly, the affirmative team loses its case and likely the round. Many in the judging community view uniqueness debates in a similar way. If the negative team has slight edge in the quality of uniqueness evidence, many judges decide that the negative team wins the entirety of the uniqueness debate. This trend in judging seems disturbing because it avoids any discussion of risk or probability. Finally, opposition to majority views of uniqueness exists. Many have begun to criticize our current fascination and black/white view of uniqueness. One example might be West Georgia's parody of "we control uniqueness" at the 1999 Harvard Debate Tournament in which the members of the West Georgia squad all dressed the same and handed out business cards that read, "We control uniqueness."

Types of Uniqueness Arguments

Uniqueness arguments are varied and can be used by either team in a debate. The negative team can question the uniqueness of an affirmative advantage or the uniqueness of affirmative disadvantages to a counterplan (Branham, 1991; Cragan & Shields, 1970; Flaningam, 1981; Hemmer, 1976; Thomas & Anderson, 1968; Zarefsky, 1969). Further, the negative must defend the uniqueness of their disadvantages by demonstrating that

they will not occur in the status quo (Freely, 1993; Ulrich, 1985). Similarly, the affirmative can make arguments that the negative teams disadvantages or counterplan advantages are likely to happen in the present system or are already occurring (Branham, 1991; Freely, 1993; Ulrich, 1985).

More specific arguments about uniqueness have come to popularity in recent times. If a debater argues that she "controls uniqueness," she is arguing that the impacts will definitely not occur. Hypothetically, there is only a risk that the plan will cause the disadvantage. "Issue specific" uniqueness is more complicated. With this argument, the negative team argues that their uniqueness evidence demonstrates that their specific impact scenario is unique, even if they cannot answer more generic uniqueness arguments. For example, a debater might argue that the Taiwan Security Act will pass even if President Bush has very little political power.

Link Debate

Good uniqueness debates force the debate to the particulars, eliminating generalities and oversimplifications. For example, some might argue that any foreign aid program will destroy commitment to George Bush's agenda in congress. Obviously, the question is more complex than that. Uniqueness arguments might help explore other causes for the disadvantages or ways that the plan was different than other aid programs. They also examine alternate causes for the impact.

Uniqueness arguments also demonstrate that a relationship exists beyond correlation (Zarefsky, 1989). Uniqueness arguments in conjunction with "empirically false" and "threshold" arguments allow both the affirmative and the negative to avoid the post hoc ergo propter hoc fallacy and other types of faulty reasoning. They do so by

illustrating the complexity of systems. For example, it is probably the case that foreign aid spending and domestic spending have different impacts on stock market perceptions of inflation. Uniqueness arguments illustrate this best because they force the negative to draw clear, credible distinctions between phenomena.

Uniqueness arguments force comparisons, preventing simple criticism. Without uniqueness debate, one could simply argue: "The plan is bad." Good uniqueness arguments force critics to say: "The plan is worse or different in X way or Y way." Further, one might argue that it is even hard to distinguish uniqueness arguments from link arguments. If I argue, "Something like the plan happened and the disadvantage did not occur," am I making a link or uniqueness argument? Without a discussion of uniqueness, a comprehensive link debate is impossible.

Research

Uniqueness prevents the reliance on one or two super-generic arguments, which are put aside and forgotten about between tournaments, years, etc. While this might not totally eliminate reliance on the same old arguments, it limits the effectiveness of a team unwilling to innovate because other teams can prepare with complicated link and impact uniqueness arguments. Further, it helps people to understand motives and relationships. For example, one might be able to understand why would organized labor fight the passage of "Fast Track" trade legislation in a way the evening news might not provide. Good uniqueness debate also requires more interpretation of evidence, increasing critical thought and argument sophistication. One cannot simply read a bunch of cards in response to well-tailored uniqueness arguments. Instead, the negative team must closely examine or distinguish between uniqueness arguments. Finally, detailed uniqueness

debate limits the ability of teams to find a one-card wonder argument, which sometimes limit in depth exploration of the topic literature. Generic uniqueness arguments can slay this type of dragon.

De-centering Impacts

A strong uniqueness debate might help to limit a race to the biggest impacts in debate rounds because the impacts could be defeated by strong and seriously considered uniqueness arguments. If extinction or nuclear destruction is inevitable, such impacts should not be considered of equal concern to other, more unique impacts.

Also, "WE control uniqueness" defends "small" debate programs against "big" programs. Because bigger schools can be better prepared for a variety of different impacts and links, they often are prepared to debate new issues more intricately than smaller schools. Absolute and strong uniqueness debates prevent big schools from getting away with just having a new or weird impact scenario. Instead, the smaller school needs only to research one level of the bigger schools argument, the uniqueness. There are different levels of controlling uniqueness—one could control uniqueness at the link, impact, or internal link level. This would allow the smaller team to center in on one level of the debate. Third, either side can control uniqueness. Healthy uniqueness debates allow neither side an advantage. Finally, uniqueness arguments center the debate on discussions of link and probability. With a healthy uniqueness and link debate, most of the time spent debating a disadvantage would necessarily be spent in those areas.

It seems likely that a focus on the impact side of disadvantages damages debate. First, it makes simple disaster comparison the norm. Do we really learn a lot figuring out whether environmental destruction or war is worse? Do we need to have these debates

every time we have a round, every year? It seems like debate would be boring and shallow in a world dominated by simple impact comparison. Second, the focus on big impacts might deter those who might otherwise join debate. Nuclear wars will likely be seen as unreal and unlikely. Third, big impact debate prevent a marketing of debate to the rest of the academy. Who wants to try to explain some of our disadvantages to the administration of their school? It might be fun to talk about these issues at times, but it hard to explain the academic merit to administrators. Fourth, a focus on impact debate forces us to privilege some bad things over other bad things. Big impact debates seem often to be a rush to a stack of dead bodies, often to exclusion of consideration of less dramatic, but more probable dangers.

Why the Problems with Uniqueness?

Many people have begun to criticize the dominance of certain types of uniqueness debating in policy debate. They point to the arguments about "issue-specific" uniqueness, "controlling" uniqueness, and the poor quality of uniqueness evidence. However, these are problems wit the way uniqueness is debated, not with uniqueness itself. "Issue specific" uniqueness can be the affirmative's best friend. If used properly, it is the beginning of a great internal link response for the affirmative. "We control uniqueness" is only a problem for the lazy team without the will to debate about probability. Even if there is a 95% chance of something occurring, there is a 5 % chance it will not. Teams and judges must simply be willing to explain and defend those arguments. In addition, other uniqueness arguments can be used to demonstrate links are empirically false. Ultimately, the problem is two fold: debaters will not go for well-developed and creative uniqueness arguments, and judges do not give uniqueness

arguments enough credibility and weight. Unless debaters and judges become interested in complex uniqueness debate, there is nothing the rest of us can do. Debaters and coaches want to win, and they will do what it takes to win.

It might also be that a cult of evidence has intruded on our debates. With the rush to get the most recent evidence, and the growing use of the highlighter, we have pushed the limits of evidence quality. In some ways our debates are bad because the evidence is bad. Complex evidence would cause better debate.

Conclusion

Few doubt that current uniqueness debates have gone astray. Often the quality of uniqueness evidence and uniqueness debating is poor in policy debate. Unfortunately, this often brings down the quality of the entirety of our debate rounds. However, the solution to these ills is not the abandonment of uniqueness as a type of argument. Instead, judges, debaters, and coaches must demand better uniqueness debates. We must demand that better evidence be read, better arguments be crafted, and better rhetoric employed. We should not give up on the concept of uniqueness; we should lift our standards for its evaluation.

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